UNITED
NATIONS

A

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/CONF.151/PC/73
26 June 1991

Original: ENGLISH

PREPARATORY COMMITTEE FOR THE UNITED NATIONS
CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT
Third session
Geneva, 12 August-4 September 1991
Working Group [**]
Item [**] of the provisional agenda

PROTECTION OF THE QUALITY AND SUPPLY OF FRESHWATER RESOURCES: APPLICATION OF INTEGRATED APPROACHES TO THE DEVELOPMENT, MANAGEMENT AND USE OF WATER RESOURCES

Report of the Secretary-General of the Conference

1. By its decisions 1/21 and 2/20, the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) requested the Secretary-General of the Conference to submit to its third session a report on progress achieved in the preparations for the International Conference on Water and the Environment, to be attended by government-designated experts and held at Dublin in January 1992. This request was taken up by the Inter-Agency Steering Committee for this Conference and the UNCED secretariat was actively supported in the preparation of this progress report.

2. The present report describes the background of the International Conference on Water and the Environment, its objectives, programme and expected outputs, as well as the preparatory process leading up to the Conference. Special attention is given to the efforts made regarding the establishment of contacts with Governments, intergovernmental bodies and other interested organizations during the preparatory process.

GE.91-61501/0899H

READEX
FICHE

I. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

3. Water is one of the essential ingredients of life on planet earth. Its availability is crucial to the efficient functioning of the biosphere and it forms the lubricant which keeps the natural environment operating smoothly. Water is also key to human development. Agricultural output is critically affected by water availability; energy production is usually dependent on water supply; industrial processes and transportation can hinge on water.

4. Most parts of the world suffer from the extremes of drought and flood. Droughts can result in the collapse of agricultural production and food supplies; floods can result in sudden and sometimes catastrophic loss of life, property damage and erosion of topsoil. Additional stresses on freshwater supplies result from industrial, agricultural and biological pollution. Many rivers, lakes and groundwater reservoirs in developed and developing countries are polluted to an alarming extent, posing direct and indirect hazards to life now and in the future.

5. With the dramatic growth in world population, especially within large cities and in areas of rapid economic growth, water demand has already outstripped supply in many regions and competing demands have led to critical water management problems there and elsewhere. Water supply problems are likely to be exacerbated in many parts of the world if climate changes come about as predicted. Changes in precipitation amounts and patterns accompanied by changing global energy inputs, affecting evaporation rates, will lead to changing scenarios for water availability. The additional stresses produced in areas already under severe strain may lead to economic collapse and social disintegration.

6. It is imperative that the world community addresses the problems of the quantity of freshwater supply and its quality with the utmost urgency. It is a matter of survival. Initiatives have to be taken at the highest international and national levels and those initiatives should translate into practical action plans at regional and local levels.

II. THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

7. Maintenance of the quality of the Earth's environment has long been recognized as outstandingly important. Under the United Nations General Assembly resolution 44/228 the protection of the quality and supply of freshwater resources is listed as one of nine issues of major concern in promoting environmentally sound sustainable development.

8. Concern for freshwater resources was demonstrated in the United Nations Water Conference held in 1977 as a result of which the Mar del Plata Action Plan was adopted. The Plan resulted in several initiatives of which the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade was the prime example.

9. During the last decade there has been a growing realization that problems of freshwater availability and quality are intimately linked to broader environmental concerns and that they should not be viewed independently. There is now also a strong perception that most aspects of economic development are dependent on reliable water resources. Hence the many international, national and local conferences convened in recent years have stressed increasingly that an integrated approach to water resources management is essential.

10. To address this vital subject an International Conference on Water and the Environment (ICWE) will be held in Dublin, Ireland, in January 1992. The Conference will address critical freshwater issues and will act as the formal entry for those issues into the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in June 1992.

11. The Conference will be hosted by the Government of Ireland and will be convened by the World Meteorological Organization on behalf of the more than 20 bodies and agencies of the United Nations system which are represented on the United Nations Administrative Committee on Co-ordination Inter-Secretariat Group for Water Resources.

12. The International Conference on Water and the Environment will be the first major United Nations-sponsored water conference since Mar del Plata considering the full range of water issues. It will be preceded by a number of meetings designed to explore, in depth, critical issues within the sphere of water management. Thus, this Conference will be the formal lead into UNCED for freshwater issues.

III. PLANNING FOR THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON WATER AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Main objectives of the Conference

13. The Conference is convened with the aims:

(a) To assess the current status of the world's freshwater resources in relation to present and future water demands and to identify priority issues for the 1990s;

(b) To develop coordinated intersectoral approaches towards managing these resources by strengthening the linkages between the various water programmes;

(c) To formulate environmentally sustainable strategies and action programmes for the 1990s and beyond to be presented to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development;

(d) To bring the above issues, strategies and actions to the attention of Governments as a basis for national programmes and to increase awareness of the environmental consequences and developmental opportunities in improving the management of water resources.

Specific tasks assigned to the Conference

14. The Preparatory Committee for the UNCED, through its decision 2/20, invited the Conference:

(a) To consider an action framework on sustainable development and management of freshwater resources, including, where feasible and appropriate, targets, timetables and possibly cost estimates;

(b) To give due account to strategies for rational and efficient use of scarce water resources;

(c) To identify key elements of a strategy for its implementation;

(d) To prepare guidelines for the elaboration of national and, where appropriate, regional action plans for the integrated development and environmentally sound management of water resources.

15. The major documentation output from the Conference will be:

(a) A published volume containing the invited keynote papers delivered to the first-day plenary sessions.

(b) A published Conference report containing conclusions and recommendations.

(c) A "Dublin Statement" as the principal document of the Conference summarizing principles for action and strategies for implementation.

Lead-up to the Conference

16. There will be several conferences and meetings which will lead into and contribute towards the synthesis of opinion at the Conference. Foremost among these are the following:

(a) Symposium on a Strategy for Water Resources Capacity Building, Delft, June 1991;

(b) Water Quality Assessment and Management, Bratislava, August 1991;

(c) ESCAP Meeting on Water Resources Planning, Bangkok, October-November 1991;

(d) Informal Consultation on integrated water management for developing countries, Copenhagen, November 1991;

(e) ASCEND 21: ICSU conference on scientific aspects of environment and development, Vienna, November 1991.

17. In addition, the subjects to be addressed at the Conference will also have been partially covered at various other major international and national gatherings in 1991. The outputs from these will be brought together during the deliberations at the Conference.

Participation in the Conference

18. Each country is invited to nominate expert participants representing planning, finance, public works, water, environment and other related institutions. United Nations bodies and agencies, NGOs, bilateral, multilateral and other external support agencies involved in the water and environmental sectors will also be invited to nominate participants.

Conference format

19. After the opening ceremony on Sunday, 26 January 1992, the Conference will consist of:

- A plenary session of one day where speakers of international standing will address the major issues.

- Working group sessions lasting three days. Background papers will be available beforehand as a guide to discussions. Documents detailing national and NGO concerns will provide added inputs to the discussions.

- Major co-sponsoring organizations will provide exhibits of successful projects and case-studies relevant to the Conference themes. Poster and demonstration sessions are planned to be held in Dublin Castle on Wednesday, 29 January 1992.

IV. ISSUES COVERED BY THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON WATER AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Global overview of freshwater issues

20. The environmental aspects of freshwater resources and their development during the remainder of this decade and into the twenty-first century will be subject to a comprehensive assessment.

21. A global overview will be given under two headings:

- Statement of the problem: assessing the resource;

- Water: the environmental and developmental dimensions - striking a balance.

22. The needs of the rural areas will be reviewed with regard to three aspects:

- Water for the people - community water supply and sanitation;

- Water for sustainable agricultural development;

- Environmental issues in rural water management.

23. Water supply and pollution issues in the context of urban and industrial development will be covered regarding:

- The importance of water resources for urban development;
- Environmental issues: impacts of water and waste management;
- Integrated urban water management.

24. The challenges for the future will cover the following aspects:

- Ecologically sound water management;
- Water allocation - economic, social, legal and regulatory approaches;
- The role of freshwater in our common future.

Action framework for water resources management

25. The basis for action plans for the integrated development and environmentally sound management of water resources will be elaborated with regard to six major themes. Key elements of a strategy for their implementation will also be identified.

26. The issues and needs addressed by the Preparatory Committee of UNCED in decision 2/20 will be duly taken into consideration when preparing the above strategies and action plans. The action proposals themselves are contained in a separate document which is presented to the Preparatory Committee as the sectoral contribution to agenda 21 on the protection of the quality and supply of freshwater resources. A selection of problem situations and potential areas for action within each of the six major themes covered by the working groups is given below.

Knowledge of the resource and the demands upon it

27. Water is a finite resource and the demands on it are constantly increasing. Development should be planned with good knowledge of water resources: their magnitude, quality and variability in space and time. Development should also be planned with good prediction of future water demands which will be greatest in areas of high population and vigorous economic growth. Understanding of interrelationships between water resources and other environmental elements and social-economic elements is essential to the adequate design of projects.

Water for sustainable agricultural production

28. Given prevailing demographic patterns, the need for food security, and other considerations, including issues of equity concerning income distribution there is a need to ensure that water resources policy becomes an effective factor in the determination of future patterns of development. The International Action Programme on Water and Sustainable Agricultural Development contains basic proposals designed to ensure the efficient use of

water for agriculture on a sustainable basis. The action programme, in its current form would constitute the basis for discussion as a means of obtaining commitments from Governments to carry out certain measures in years to come.

Water and sustainable urban development

29. The threats of increasing water demand and water quality degradation are particularly concentrated in urban areas and in their expanding fringes which are experiencing unprecedented levels of population growth and industrial expansion. The environmental and developmental consequences of the current trends could have serious long-term implications for developing countries with the urban poor bearing the brunt of the health problems caused by these trends. As countries reach a higher level of economic development, a greater proportion of their water use and waste disposal will be in urban areas. There is consequently an alarming widening of the gap between water demand and supply, between consumption and potentially available safe water resources in many of the urban areas of developing countries. Although human settlements exert only a small proportion of the overall urban water demand, the quality of this water needs to be sufficiently high to maintain health.

Environmentally sound water management

30. Socio-economic development, including water resources development and utilization has an impact on the natural environment. More often than not this impact will be nefarious in various degrees. Consequently, development will usually carry with it a trade-off between socio-economic benefits and environmental impacts. These trade-offs will have a more positive balance to the extent that benefits are well defined and realistic, and deleterious environmental effects are minimized. Freshwaters and their supporting ecosystems need to be protected through pollution control and land use planning measures. Thus, freshwater quality will be maintained at the levels required for agricultural, industrial and human consumptive uses.

Capacity building for water resources management

31. It has been well documented that the inadequate capacity of institutions and their human resources along with a fragmented approach to water management are major constraints to effective water management in the interests of national development. The working group would discuss strategies to improve the capacities of developing countries to address water-related issues, including their readiness to receive appropriate assistance from external support agencies. These strategies also apply to capacity building related to the programmes of the other working groups. Specific issues and action programmes are specified in the Delft Declaration, issued in June 1991.

Integrated water resources management

32. The United Nations Water Conference in 1977 expressed deep concern at an impending crisis due to an ever-growing scarcity of water resources of acceptable quality at affordable costs. The world has already witnessed such crises and it is increasingly evident that the potential for major crises of national and regional proportions in the near future looms even greater.

The degradation of water resources related to poverty, on the one hand, and economic activity on the other, in addition to the deleterious effect on the environment has a further negative impact on the effective supply of water for various uses. There is a need for strategies for ensuring that water resources policies are an integral part of socio-economic policies defining patterns of development, taking into account physical constraints, environmental objectives, and socio-economic constraints and objectives. There is also a need for strategies for the effective development and flexible allocation of resources from surface and groundwater basins relative to existing and anticipated needs and opportunities, including the introduction of water reclamation projects in many areas.

V. PREPARATORY PROCESS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON WATER AND THE ENVIRONMENT

33. Information about the convening of the Conference has been made available to all Governments of members of the United Nations and other specialized agencies by the Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization. Governments have been invited to nominate focal points who will provide linkage to the Conference secretariat and aid in selection of participants. As of 31 May 1991, 55 countries had nominated focal points.

34. The Intersecretariat Group for Water Resources of the Administrative Committee on Coordination constitutes the Inter-Agency Steering Committee for the Conference. The organizations and agencies represented at that Committee assumed responsibility for obtaining the contributions and support of their respective constituencies, including their governing bodies and related NGOs. Meetings of the steering committee follow the sessions of the Preparatory Committee of UNCED and make sure that the requests made to the Secretary-General of UNCED are duly taken into account when the documentation for the Conference is prepared. This Group also assists in the preparation of documents for the UNCED Preparatory Committee.

35. In support of the Conference a public information and promotion campaign is under way with the objective to generate interest and create an appropriate climate for the Conference. Emphasis is put not only on covering the Conference period but also on the preparatory phase and the various specialized consultations leading up to the Conference. Activities are aimed at the global, regional and country levels for maximum outreach to the media and the general public.